

Competency for Life: Maintaining Certification

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Before signing up for the National Certification Program, I wanted to know, "What do I have to do to maintain it?" and "How often do I have to renew it?"

The mail confirms that some of you want the same answers. Phone calls vary from admissions of "sheer terror" about the prospect of unreasonably hard requirements for continuing education to the opinion that a onetime exam should be the sole requirement to remain certified forever. Through other communications, many of you conveyed understanding that what passes for competency at the beginning of a career does not remain fixed and static throughout the life of that career.

Quality Control

The National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) addresses this issue through their certification maintenance guidelines. In their view, standards for continuing competency based on outdated achievements lack validity. The message to health care professionals seems loud and clear: It is essential to keep knowledge and skills current.

To obtain approval from NOCA, the NCBTMB plan must meet eight criteria:

- promote education through the duration of one's professional life
- use meaningful incentives rather than either unrealistically harsh sanctions or requirements so easily met as to be insignificant
- provide reliable indications of an individual's areas of continuing

competence

- be justifiable economically
- be acceptable to the profession
- be updated periodically in terms of practice
- be linked to discipline
- advance the technology of measurement and evaluation

How do we assure not only NOCA, but consumers, employers, third-party payers, government authorities and practitioners themselves that professional practice remains up-to-date? Some institutions offer accreditation of programs, while government agencies require occupational licensure—just two examples of quality control measures. The third, certification, represents the highest voluntary credential an individual can earn. Recertification (maintenance) exists as a subsystem of the whole credentialing process.

Measuring Success

One way continuing practitioners can demonstrate their equivalent skills and knowledge is to retake and pass the entry level exam. When such an option is available, statistics show that fewer than one tenth of one percent of certificants choose to retake a certification exam. Does anyone really like the confined, regulated, anxiety-laden atmosphere of an examination room?

I do know of one incredibly motivated and enthusiastic certificant who has passed the exam three times. He intends to take it again this November. However, I doubt that many certificants who've found the courage and personal resources to take it thus

far will cheerfully apply for recertification through a second sitting of the exam.

A second measure for assessing skills, knowledge, and attitudes centers on a combination of formal and informal educational programs and learning activities meant to link recertification with personal growth. A further refinement of this approach is to specifically create a standard whereby practitioners have choices relevant to their individual scope of practice. The intention is to help practitioners identify strengths and weaknesses relative to others in the field, convert weaknesses into strengths, and document that this process has occurred.

A third method of enhancing competency embodies a work experience requirement. Doing the work involves learning, unlearning, and adjustment to changing conditions.

To help assure that NOCA guidelines are met, the NCBTMB engaged a consultant in continuing education training, Louis Phillips, Ed. D., to assist in the research and development phase of our recertification program. Part one of the overall plan reached completion in August when the NCBTMB approved a flexible, user-friendly model—one that will grow along with us. Development of a recertification manual will follow.

Our aim is to build a recertification process that's reasonable and fair—and meaningful to every practicing certificant. ♦